

Nadler: GAO Report Confirms Health Risk Following 9/11

Tuesday, 07 September 2004

Washington, DC -- Representative Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) today made the following statement at a Congressional hearing on the health effects of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing today regarding the health effects of the September 11th terrorist attack on those who live or work near Ground Zero, and for allowing me to participate on the panel with my colleagues. As the Member of Congress representing Ground Zero, I have heard from far too many constituents with health problems because of exposure to contaminants in World Trade Center dust.

For almost three years, I have been investigating the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) response, and that of other federal agencies, to the terrorist attacks in New York City. In April 2002, I published a White Paper documenting EPA's malfeasance, and in August of 2003, the EPA Inspector General issued a report documenting that the EPA gave false assurances to the people of New York regarding the air we were breathing and that the EPA refused to take responsibility to decontaminate indoor spaces, such as apartments, offices, and schools, despite the fact that they are federally mandated to do so. Earlier this year, residents, workers and school children filed a class action lawsuit against the EPA in an effort to finally get the agency to do its job, and do it right, as well as to request medical relief.

I am very sorry to see that the EPA is not present at this hearing today. At the last hearing on this subject back in October, I asked the EPA some questions, and as far as I know, they have yet to provide the answers. The EPA has also yet to fully answer a FOIA request submitted by myself, Rep. Major Owens and Rep. Anna Eshoo, along with the support of Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, and Ranking Members John Dingell, George Miller, Henry Waxman and John Conyers. In order to fully address the issues under consideration here today, I would hope that this committee would receive all the information requested by Congress.

I understand that Chairman Shays and Rep. Maloney want to focus more on the health registry and the new GAO Report than on some of the EPA issues. Frankly, we do not need EPA to be here to tell us that people are sick as a result of exposure to hazardous substances on September 11. But many of the problems associated with the health registry stem from EPA failures in responding to the terrorist attacks. For example, the EPA has never properly tracked the release of hazardous substances and characterized the site to determine who has been exposed, what they were exposed to, and the full extent of how far this contamination has spread. The EPA, instead, drew an arbitrary boundary at Canal Street, which the health registry follows.

Even today's New York Times points this out in a story on this very GAO Report. According to the article, "there is still no definitive answer to what exactly was in the dust or to how many people suffered because of their exposure." Again, this is because the EPA never characterized the site consistent with federal law. The article goes on to say that although the EPA warned people working directly on the rubble to wear protective masks, "the agency maintained that the dust that settled over a wider area included only low levels of asbestos and generally was not harmful, a position that a spokeswoman said the agency continues to hold." You simply cannot separate the health effects of 9/11 from EPA's response at the site.

I believe it is very clear what the federal government should do to protect the health of all of those exposed to hazardous substances as a result of 9/11. The EPA should follow its federally mandated procedures to characterize the site, and the federal government should cover the actual medical treatment of those in need. We must do more than just a screening program. The victims of the terrorist attack are not just statistics.

The GAO Report under consideration today provides more disturbing evidence of the extent of the health impacts following 9/11, and the gaps in medical treatment for those afflicted. According to the report, ninety percent of the

firefighters and EMS workers at the WTC site had respiratory ailments. Of the 332 firefighters in the study that reported "WTC Cough", only about half have shown any improvement. The GAO Report also found that the people living and working in Lower Manhattan experienced health effects similar to first responders, and that almost 75% of respondents living near the WTC site experienced respiratory symptoms. The only assistance for these residents is the health registry, which does not provide any actual medical treatment.

It troubles me that it has been almost three years since the attacks, and we have made so little progress in helping people recover physically and mentally from the attacks. I am pleased that this committee is continuing to look into the health effects of September 11, and I look forward to hearing from the witnesses and learning more about this GAO Report so we can move ahead and try to make progress on this issue. The first responders, workers, residents and all those affected by the attacks deserve more from the federal government, and I stand ready to work with my colleagues in that regard.

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